

The Priority of Preaching

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If preaching is “the absorbingly arduous yet glorious work of proclaiming the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ,”¹ then the description of the priority of preaching which ignores this necessary element embraces disqualification from the very beginning. To avoid this negative is one of the calls within this writing. After all, preaching “was the method by which Christ chose that His Gospel should be spread through the world.”² By God’s design, it is a method which requires a messenger.

There is, indeed, no higher passion to which the messenger called of God *should* or *could* aspire than preaching “a meaningful sound from the pulpit.”³ In fact, our preaching ministry may not be Christian unless preaching is central because preaching was central to Christ (Lk. 4:18-19; Mk. 3:14; 16:15).

In a nutshell, preaching must be a top priority. Indeed, “the great appointed means of spreading the good tidings of salvation through Christ is preaching – words spoken to the individual, or to the assembly. And this, nothing can supercede.”⁴ Because of the desperate conditions of the church and the world, “there is no greater privilege than to be the proclaimer of divine truth.”⁵

In order to highlight the significance of preaching scripture, it is only appropriate to address both *the nature of scripture*, as well as *the relationship between preaching and the biblical text*.

¹ John Henry Jowett, *The Preacher: His Life and Work*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1912), 9-10.

² Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1871), 7.

³ Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching for Today*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1987), xi.

⁴ John Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1926), 2.

⁵ Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 357.

The Nature of Scripture

First, scriptural truths are authoritative. To state that “the Bible is worthy to be called Holy Scripture because it conveys, mirrors, or reflects something authentic or valid about God and his works”⁶ is no trifling assertion. To the contrary, the very issue of the nature of scripture and its authoritative role in divine-human affairs is magnified and intensified by the fact that “Scripture views itself as a message from God.”⁷ Indeed, from an internal witness, notably 2 Tim. 3:16-17, “the Scripture makes the test of its own validity to be in what it can do: its moral power”⁸: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

So, whether viewed from the standpoint of its origin (*from God*), its oracles (*about God & His works*), or its objective (“*profitable for . . . every good work*”), this Library of divine and diverse writings expresses “the deepest truth about [God and] man and his relation to God that can be reached by finite and sinful beings.”⁹ It is authoritative to the core. Therefore, it alone is “the final arbiter of all doctrinal statements.”¹⁰

Second, scriptural truths are applicable. In other words, its truths may be applied to the various situations or encounters of everyday life. Rather than being a miscellaneous collection of ancient artifacts

⁶ J. Barr, “Authority of Scripture” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Keith Crim, Supplementary Volume, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 794.

⁷ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Authority of Scripture,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 4, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 362.

⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, “The Holy Scriptures,” in *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, eds. Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr., vol. IV, (Waco: Word Book, Publisher, 1971), 343.

⁹ Alan Richardson, “Authority of Scripture,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Keith Crim, vol. 4, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 251.

¹⁰ Osborne, *Spiral*, 287.

somehow preserved for the Archives of Antiquity, its contents vibrate with a relevance that rings loudly and clearly. This truth mandates that the messengers of God accurately ascertain the biblical author's intended meaning. In fact, truths from a biblical text must be applied "with sensitivity and tact,"¹¹ thereby avoiding a perilous portrayal of something in the Bible which really isn't there. The possibility of hermeneutical psychosis is real!

Third, scriptural truths are accessible. After all, the Bible is about revelation or disclosure of a gracious God showing Himself and His desires or will to humankind. If God had not revealed Himself to us *in* and *through* the truths in the Bible, we would not know Him. Therefore, "the purpose of the Bible is accomplished when men are brought into an actual knowledge of God through faith in Jesus Christ and submission to Him as Lord."¹² Were the scriptures not accessible, this would never happen! If we do not believe this, we should either repent or find something else to do.

The Relationship Between Preaching and the Biblical Text

2 Timothy 4:1-2: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction."

In keeping with this charge, therefore, "the preacher's task is to ensure that the Word speaks as clearly today as it did in ancient

¹¹ Ibid., 347.

¹² Frank Stagg, *New Testament Theology*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962), 9.

times.”¹³ Indeed, “if preachers wish to preach with divine authority, they must proclaim the message of the inspired Scriptures, for the Scriptures alone are the word of God written; the Scriptures alone have divine authority.”¹⁴

As far as God is concerned, there is only one type of preaching – Biblical. If preaching is not biblical, then it is not of God. Therefore, there are at least four factors which must characterize the proper relationship between preaching and the biblical text.

First, the biblical preacher believes the Bible works (Heb. 4:12). The Bible doesn’t have to be proven in a scientific laboratory. The biblical preacher is one who has confidence that the Author of the Bible will use its truths to work out His purpose and design. Just like a married woman in the bedroom with her husband, the Bible wants to be loved and not manipulatively used for selfish purposes. We *do* not and *should* not use the Bible to prove that our ideas are true.

Second, the biblical preacher spends time with the Bible. 2 Tim. 2:15: “Study/Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing/handling accurately the word of truth.” Ecclesiastes 12:12: “*Much study is a weariness of the flesh.*” Is it possible, therefore, that some preachers have no need to be weary?

Too often, preachers enter the pulpit unprepared. *Dry goods and notions* which would make anyone nod their heads may well be a sad but appropriate description of some preachers and their preaching

¹³ Osborne, *Spiral*, 318.

¹⁴ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 12.

when they walk into a pulpit with little more than ideas off the top of their heads! Preachers must pay the price of being prayerfully prostrate before God and His Word. Preachers must preach from the overflow of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Preachers may also use all the other “extensive preaching resources available today” so that “there is absolutely no excuse to come to the pulpit unprepared”¹⁵ - unless, of course, preaching is too low on one’s priority level. And if that is the case, then perhaps another look at one’s purpose for preaching should occur. After all, we cannot be guilty of being too lazy to dig deeply and diligently in the divine book.

Third, the biblical preacher makes the Bible understandable. Preachers should be like coal miners who go down into the deep and then bring up the goods for people to burn. However, we are dealing with bread rather than coal. And we are not the bread-makers. The Lord provides the bread. However, we are to carry it bite-size [in an understandable manner] to the people. It makes no sense if we cannot communicate its truth in an understandable way.

Fourth, the biblical preacher proves the Bible to be practical. We must shake out the sand of Palestine and let them know that it works today *here and now* – like it did *there and then*! We have a people-centered God and we must have a people-centered preaching ministry that is in touch with their needs – needs which even they themselves may not recognize! There is a key to every heart. To courageously knock the door down or to walk off callously may not always be the proper kind of preaching!

¹⁵ Harper Shannon, “Shannon Lauds Preaching,” in *Facts and Trends* 23, no. 6 (June 1979): 2.

John Henry Jowett once said regarding his call and passion in preaching, “I am conscious of no distractions in the shape of competitors for my strength and allegiance.”¹⁶ If his words sound foreign to any preachers today, then perhaps we need to reassess the competitors!

In fact, to seriously ponder his comments should motivate us to heed, with all preparedness, the words of Paul in 2 Tim. 1:12: “Stir up the gift of God which is in thee.”

¹⁶Jowett, *The Preacher*, 9.